yolo basin foundation

January 27, 2006

Mr. Ryan Broddrick
Director, State Department of Fish and Game
Resources Agency
1416 Ninth Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Mr. Lester Snow
Director, State Department of Water Resources
Resources Agency
1416 Ninth Street
Sacramento, CA 95814

Dear Mr. Broddrick and Mr. Snow:

I am writing on behalf of my colleagues on the Yolo Basin Foundation Board of Directors to express our concerns regarding proposals to improve fish habitat in the Yolo Bypass. The Yolo Basin Foundation Board believes that it is important to consider the effects of fish habitat improvement proposals on existing land uses in the Bypass before promoting the projects in the larger community. We feel that it is time to address some specific issues regarding the impacts of spring inundation on current land management in the Yolo Bypass including the 16,000-acre Yolo Wildlife Area (YWA) managed by the State Department of Fish and Game. We also have some questions about proposals for improvement of fish passage.

Spring Floodplain Inundation

Spring inundation of the Yolo Bypass is a natural phenomenon that happens on an average of every three years for at least a portion of the Bypass. Recent research has indicated that spring flooding provides valuable floodplain habitat for splittail and juvenile salmon.

Proposals to modify the Fremont Weir in order to provide regular, managed spring inundation to improve fish habitat have been actively promoted for several years. While these proposals are in the planning stages, several important questions need to be addressed through research, hydraulic modeling, and active discussions with the many stakeholders who have an interest in the Yolo Bypass.

1. How would modification of the Fremont Weir affect the frequency and duration of flooding throughout the entire Bypass?
2. What is the area that would be flooded with managed springtime inundation?
3. How would the flooding be controlled to protect downstream agriculture and wetland management?
4. Who would pay for the increase in maintenance costs to control emergent vegetation on the Yolo Wildlife Area and throughout the Bypass?

5. With the loss of agricultural income, how would maintenance of the Yolo Wildlife Area be funded?
6. How would the increased costs in mosquito control be funded?
7. Is Reclamation Board staff involved in the planning and would the Reclamation Board approve the proposed actions?
8. Funding from the North American Waterfowl Management Act paid for the infrastructure to manage thousands of acres of wetland habitat. This funding carries with it legal mandates for wetland management. Would managed spring inundation affect this infrastructure and prevent its use as mandated by the federal funding?
9. Would modification of the Fremont Weir allow other purposes beyond spring flooding such as moving water down the Bypass as part of a water transfer program?
10. Would spring time inundation of the floodplain create an environment where elemental mercury is methylized and thus available to bioaccumulate in the food chain?
11. As the trustee agency for fisheries resources in the state of California, would the Department of Fish and Game remain the principal decision maker regarding fisheries issues in the Yolo Bypass?

Fish Passage

Improved fish passage at the Fremont Weir is another project under discussion. Improvement could be through modification of the existing fish ladder or by modifying the flows at the Fremont Weir. It is important to consider whether improved fish passage will actually promote movement of special status species such as salmon and steelhead smolts down the Bypass from the Sacramento River system. If so, would Bypass farmers and wetland managers be required to screen their pumps and other water diversions? This would be an expensive impact and could adversely affect the ability of farmers to continue their livelihoods. It could make wetland management prohibitively expensive.

Putah Creek provides some spawning habitat for salmon as evidenced by the recent salmon runs. Promotion of salmon passage is an example of successful interagency cooperation. Department of Water Resources biologists monitor fish movement in the Toe Drain at the mouth of Putah Creek. There is a check dam up stream on Putah Creek that is used to irrigate local farms as well as the Wildlife Area. By prior agreement, the flashboards for this dam are removed around the first week of November to augment the salmon recruitment flows released from Solano Diversion dam as directed by the Putah Creek Accord. DWR biologists, Fish and Game managers and biologists, Los Rios Farms managers, the Putah Creek Streamkeeper and operators of the Diversion Dam coordinate the release of the water that has successfully recruited salmon upstream the last five years.

There has been considerable discussion of methods to improve salmon passage up Putah Creek. Rerouting of the Creek to bring salmon in above the check dam is one proposal that is being promoted for inclusion in the Land Management Plan. It is sometimes included with promotion of splittail habitat in the lower reaches of a rerouted creek.

1. Would flows mandated by the Putah Creek Accord be maintained in a rerouted creek?
2. Would splittail habitat management be compatible with salmon passage?
3. What would be the effect of splittail management on the existing grazing leases?

Maintaining compatibility with flood protection

The Yolo Wildlife Area was initially established with the goal of providing waterfowl habitat for birds traveling the Pacific Flyway. What has evolved is a diverse wetlands ecosystem that is benefiting a multitude of species. This wetlands ecosystem is being managed with the recognition that the primary goal of the Yolo Bypass is flood control. Flood compatibility is maintained in many different ways. Most importantly, emergent vegetation is kept at acceptable levels as prescribed through the utilization of hydraulic modeling data in the mid 1990's.

Manipulation of water levels is the primary tool for maintaining an acceptable level of emergent vegetation (tules and cattails). Prolonged spring inundation promotes the growth of emergent vegetation in wetlands, while upland areas experience a proliferation of cocklebur during wet springs, diminishing their value to grazing animals. Removal of tules and cattails is an expensive and time-consuming management problem. Land managers wisely choose appropriately timed draw downs to maintain the flood carrying capacity of thousands of acres of land in the Yolo Bypass. A spring draw down is essential to control the growth of tules and cattails. April 1st draw downs provide important feeding habitat for shorebirds and waterfowl, stimulate the germination of annual grasses beneficial to wildlife, and dewater thousands of acres of critical nesting habitat for ground nesting birds such as ring-necked pheasant, northern harriers, mallards and western meadowlarks. Spring draw down is also important for mosquito control, especially with the arrival of West Nile virus.

Agriculture

Agriculture, including row crops, rice and ranching, is an important component of the management of the Yolo Wildlife Area, as it is throughout the Bypass. Agriculture provides much needed income for Wildlife Area operations, maintains the vegetation in a compatible state and contributes towards the local farming economy. It also provides valuable wildlife habitat for a multitude of species irrespective of land ownership. Swainson hawks foraging in fresh cut alfalfa, minutes later may be found roaming the recently irrigated swamp timothy fields of the Wildlife Area. Further south on the Tule Ranch, spectacular wildflower displays in rare vernal pool habitats are maintained by managed grazing of livestock. These examples illustrate the successful integration of agriculture into the management of the Wildlife Area.

Farming in the Bypass is a risky business every year. More frequent springtime inundation would adversely affect the ability of Bypass farmers to maintain their livelihoods. Depending on when the spring flooding occurs, the ground can be too wet to plow and plant. The May flooding in 2005 resulted in the loss of thousands of acres of rice crops since the ground did not dry out in time to prepare fields and plant them. Spring flooding means that only very short season crops can be planted. With the loss of agriculture comes the loss of income for private farmers as well as the loss of income at the Yolo Wildlife Area for operations and mandated maintenance.

Open Space Resource

The Yolo Wildlife Area is one of the largest open space resources in Yolo County and the greater Sacramento Area. More frequent flooding will limit public use. Legally, the Wildlife Area must be closed when the Fremont Weir is spilling, which limits opportunities for students to visit the Wildlife Area. Over 4,000 students participate in the Discover the Flyway program

each year, with about half visiting in the spring. Other popular public uses, such as wildlife viewing and hunting will also be impacted.

The diverse wetlands of the Yolo Wildlife Area are a popular destination for birders. National Audubon has designated it as an Important Bird Area (IBA), a national program. The YWA is an IBA in part due to the large number of Northern Pintail that spend the winter and early spring in the open shallow wetlands and rice fields of the Yolo Basin. The open wetlands of the YWA that meet flood control objectives are also prime pintail habitat.

North American Waterfowl Management Plan

Over 15 years ago, the Yolo Basin was identified as a key component in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan for restoring the Pacific Flyway under international auspices. The Central Valley Joint Venture, created to implement the goals of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, continues to promote the recovery of waterfowl populations that migrate into and through the Yolo Basin. Millions of dollars in grant funding from the North American Waterfowl Management Act have been invested in creating the infrastructure to manage a wetlands ecosystem at the YWA. These grants carry with them legal requirements regarding wetlands management in perpetuity. Several other state and federal conservation easement programs have also invested in wetlands in the Yolo Bypass. Landowners participating in these programs also have legal requirements to follow an operations plan approved by the granting agency.

Community Involvement

The Yolo Wildlife Area was the first large-scale restoration project in the Yolo Bypass and broke new ground by showing that wildlife habitat, flood control, and agriculture could successfully co-exist and in fact be mutually beneficial. The State Department of Water Resources, Aquatic Restoration Program Implementation (ARPI) Branch, has invested considerable staff effort in planning for improvement of native fish habitat in the Yolo Bypass. As the implementing agency for the CALFED Ecosystem Restoration Program, the Department of Fish and Game, is funding this effort. It is evident that there is an active effort to promote spring flood plain inundation and improvement of fish passage as part of the development of the Land Management Plan.

The Yolo Basin Foundation Board of Directors would like to encourage an inclusive and productive community dialogue regarding improvement of fish habitat in the Yolo Bypass. Establishment of the Yolo Wildlife Area took many years because of the complex issues associated with management of wildlife habitat in the engineered floodplain had to be addressed. Difficult issues were addressed from the start by including all interest groups. Many of the groups became partners in the project and participated in the planning prior to establishment of the Wildlife Area. The subsequent management of the Yolo Wildlife Area has created an atmosphere of good will among stakeholders representing wildlife management, flood control, vector control, public use, and agriculture.

The Yolo Basin Foundation Board of Directors cannot support efforts that rely on this good will while promoting projects that could adversely affect the Yolo Wildlife Area and other lands in

the Yolo Bypass. Now is the time to address landowner concerns by answering the questions raised in this letter.

We hope that the efforts that led to the successful establishment and continuing management of Yolo Wildlife Area will be seen as a model for future projects. We look forward to participating in this important dialogue in the months to come.

Sincerely,

Val Dolcini

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Chairman of the Board

Cc:
Dave Feliz, Yolo Wildlife Area Manager
Peter Rabbon, The Reclamation Board
Steve Bradley, Dept. of Water Resources
Sandra Morey, Dept. of Fish and Game, Region 2
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Sid England, Lower Putah Creek Coordinating Committee
David Brown, Sacramento Yolo Mosquito and Vector Control District
Yolo County Board of Supervisors
Paul Buttner, California Rice Commission
Bob McLandress, California Waterfowl Association
Mark Hennelly, California Waterfowl Association
Greg Greene, Ducks Unlimited
Bob Shaffer, Central Valley Joint Venture
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